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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000591

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR NEA/ARPI (TROBERTS), G/TIP (FASSEFA), DRL
(JDEMARIA)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM ELAB ETRD KOCI SOCI PREL MU

SUBJECT: OMAN SURVEY BY TIP ACTIVIST COMES UP EMPTY

REF: A. MUSCAT 164

1B. MUSCAT 209

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Regional human rights and anti-trafficking activist Ansar Burney made a short-notice visit to Oman April 8-9 in a quest to locate suspected trafficked Pakistani child camel jockeys he believes are missing from camps in the UAE. In his first visit with Embassy personnel, Burney accompanied PolOff for an off-road excursion to the nearby camel racetracks at Barka and Al-Felaij, but a survey of those locations revealed no foreign camel jockeys. Burney and the Embassy nevertheless plan to make a future joint visit to the border town of Al-Buraimi, where Burney claims he has witnessed "a couple dozen" children crossing the border in jockey uniforms unchecked. Burney speculates that Pakistani children are taken there from the UAE to remain out of the spotlight while waiting to be employed as needed for UAE races. Embassy Muscat will continue to work with Burney to track down any leads he may produce that might corroborate stories of trafficked children either in the border region or elsewhere in Oman. To date, however, we have seen no evidence to substantiate his claims of trafficked camel jockeys in Oman. END SUMMARY.

WHERE ARE ALL THE KIDS?

12. (SBU) After weeks of energetic efforts on our part to link up with Pakistani anti-trafficking activist Ansar Burney, he made an unexpected stop in Oman April 8-9 to visit a purported "uzba", or camel jockey camp, just west of Muscat. In his first visit with Embassy personnel in Oman, Burney guided PolOff April 8 on an off-road excursion to the nearby racetracks of Barka and Al-Falaij to shed light on his earlier claims that there were Pakistani children in the vicinity.

13. (SBU) The racetrack near Barka is a small practice track surrounded by a relatively poor goat herding village. While a few Omani youngsters came to greet Burney and PolOff as they wandered through the village, it was a rather quiet Friday afternoon with few people in sight. Burney was puzzled by the serene setting and, determined to find Pakistani children, led PolOff on a winding tour through the dusty village and its local track. After a thorough search, Burney and PolOff found no evidence of any Pakistani children or of any jockey camp near the racetrack or anywhere in the area.

14. (SBU) Burney and PolOff then proceeded to a more substantial facility at the Sultan's racetrack in Al-Falaij. The Al-Falaij racetrack is relatively new and remains somewhat under construction. The fenced track is only used a few times during the season and closed to the public for much of the year. The adjoining camel farm houses 500-1000 camels that belong to the Royal Oman Camel Corps. An off-road drive around the perimeter permitted a few peeks into the sprawling grounds with large, shaded barns for the camels and a substantial administrative building in the center. According to the Royal Guard who met Burney and PolOff at the gate, visitors are welcome during normal working hours of Saturday through Thursday. After registering at the front office, guests can view the camels as they are exercised by the trainers. Despite the limited access on this particular day, no children or areas that might serve as a child camel jockey camp were in evidence either there or in the surrounding village and desert area.

BURAIMI BORDER TROUBLES?

15. (SBU) Prior to departing for Abu Dhabi on April 9, Burney met with DCM and Emboffs to share his views on the situation of camel jockeys in the UAE. He expressed his concern that

since the UAE has declared its intention to ban underage camel jockeys, he speculates that children may have been smuggled across the border into neighboring countries for temporary hiding. (Note: Burney was dubious that a ministerial decree from the UAE officials to ban child jockeys would be forthcoming. He was disturbed that the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has already applauded the UAE on a law that he said has yet to be decreed. End note.) Burney said that in trips to the twin border towns of Al-Ain (UAE) and Al-Buraimi (Oman), he claimed to have witnessed children, still wearing their racing helmets and sitting in the beds of pickup trucks, cross the border unchecked. According to his sources (NFI), Burney believes the children are residing in Oman in ones or twos with fake parents in scattered domiciles (in contrast to group housing common in UAE camps) while waiting to be hired out to wealthy Emiratis for races in the UAE.

16. (SBU) Burney believes that Pakistani women are able to bribe Pakistani officials to obtain fake passports that include pictures of their "children," mostly aged 3-4 years old. Burney acknowledged the difficulty Gulf law enforcement would have in detecting false family relationships when, for example, a "family" of four arrive at a border crossing all having valid passports and visas that indicate a familial relationship. Should the Royal Oman Police ever conduct raids on these alleged homes in Al-Buraimi, Burney advised that they would need to enlist a Pakistani interrogator to truly divine a false family relationship. Burney said he needed to do further research into where in Al-Buraimi these alleged false families may be residing, and promised to assist PolOff in a future visit to Al-Buraimi to try to corroborate these allegations. He likewise promised to provide the Embassy information on 14 Omani children he claims to have rescued through his camel jockey rehabilitation center in Abu Dhabi.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) The Embassy is keen to investigate viable allegations of potential trafficking in Oman. While Burney's speculation about jockey camps near Muscat proved unfounded during the April 8 site surveys, we hope to arrange further trips with him to racetracks in Oman's interior (which the Embassy has previously visited and reported on - see refs) and in Salalah to resolve his concerns about the children he believes may have been removed from the UAE to other GCC locations, or at least to more remote locations within the UAE. As we pointed out to Burney, however, the camel racing season in Oman ended in March and will not resume before the fall. In addition to the fact that we have never found non-Omani jockeys participating in Omani races, visits to any race facility in Oman for the next several months will likely uncover nothing more than a vacant track. His allegation that a dozen or more trafficked children may be residing in Al-Buraimi with false parents while awaiting employment opportunities in Emirati races, however, should be something that can be looked into in the nearer term. We hope to make a joint inspection of any identified homes with Burney at his earliest convenience. We also remain curious to learn details of the 14 Omani children he claims to have rescued and repatriated from the UAE.

STEWART